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Water Accountability & Equity Act
Taxation, Finance & Economic Development Committee
May 16th, 2019
Position: Favorable

Chairwoman Middleton, Vice Chair Pinkett, and members of the Taxation, Finance & Economic Development Committee,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify before your committee, and share my story about my struggle with my water bills.

It all started in 2017 when my neighbor came over, asking if I knew my house was up for sale. I told her no, that must be a mistake. She had the paper in her hand, flipped to the section with the list of properties that were up for tax sale and there it was. The home I have lived in for 32 years was listed for tax sale at \$1,532.50, the amount I owed on my water bill.

In 2010, I was injured at my job with the Baltimore City Public Schools and was forced to leave my job with a pinched nerve and a herniated disk. Now, I live on my disability check, which is less than a thousand dollars a month. Between my mortgage, my car payments, my electric bills, my water bills, my prescription drugs, and buying groceries, my budgeting has become a nightmare. I want to pay all my bills and I am actively trying to pay all my bills but my fixed income makes that nearly impossible.

In order to save my home, I tried calling the Department of Finance, and they gave me the runaround for two days. Each person I talked to would say I needed to talk to someone else, and I couldn't get any answers from anyone. Frustrated, I went downtown to DPW. After waiting two hours, when I was called up, the Customer Service Representative told me it was too late to process any applications and that I needed to come back the next day.

The next day I went back to DPW and waited three hours. When I was called up and I explained my situation, the woman told me that in order to save my house, I would have to pay \$98 a month for my regular water bill, and an additional \$298 a month for my catch-up payment on my bills moving forward. When I added it up and realized that they were asking for \$400 a month, I couldn't believe it.

I told the woman I couldn't afford to pay nearly half my income for my water bill. She said to me, "Ms. Brown, I don't want to stress you out, but it's not our problem if you can't afford your bill. You're overdue."

I ended up borrowing the money from my brother in order to save our family home. He has been helping me pay the water bill ever since. We have been paying \$300 a month to DPW, but are still falling behind.

I want to stay on top of my bills, but they're making it nearly impossible for me. I just can't afford it. On my fixed income, I live below the federal poverty line. As written, with the affordability program outlined in the Water Accountability & Equity Act, my water bill would be around \$20 a month -- 2% of my income, not 30% of my income like I'm paying now for my regular water bill and catch-up payments. This would make an immense difference in my life and would lift an enormous financial burden.

I encourage you to pass the Water Accountability & Equity Act.

Thank you,

Stephanie Brown